

The strength of the nation depends on the strength of America's families and communities. Nebraska is fortunate enough to have many selfless and dedicated individuals who live this truth each day. They are our "Hometown Heroes" who generously sacrifice time and provide assistance to improve the quality of life for persons in their communities, especially our most vulnerable.

I was honored to nominate two very special Hometown Heroes for the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's 2010 Angels in Adoption award. Leigh and Patrick Esau of Lincoln are longtime foster and adoptive parents who have taken in more than 20 children in need over the last 10 years. While their foster parenting record alone is heroic, they have dedicated countless hours to meeting a vital need for foster families across the entire state.

After welcoming several young foster children into their home, the Esaus realized that they didn't have the basic items needed to care for young children. Many of their foster children arrived with only the clothes on their backs and often without more than a few hours notice. This was an especially challenging reality when it came to taking in babies, and after several expensive late-night runs to pick up car seats and other essential equipment at whatever stores were open, they realized that providing the basic needs of foster children can be a serious financial barrier to foster parenting.

Motivated by this realization, Leigh founded the Foster Care Closet in 2006. The Closet is a non-profit organization that exists to help meet the physical and emotional needs of all children that are wards of the State of Nebraska as well as the families in which they reside. The Closet is a volunteer-run place where foster parents can pick up like-new or gently used clothing and shoes, car seats, and essential baby items free of charge. Volunteers meet with families, and offer support and education in working with the foster care system. In addition to foster families, the Closet's clientele includes case managers, biological parents, and emergency shelters. Because of continued constraints within the foster care system, the demand for the Closet's services continues to grow and the organization continues to expand to meet the increasing need.

The Esaus' service to foster families in Lincoln alone is remarkable, and why many consider them their Hometown Heroes. However, they realized that the same challenges existed across the entire state—so they took the Foster Care Closet on the road. Their mobile Closet has visited Norfolk, Kearney, Grand Island, Fremont, and Omaha. Last year, the Foster Care Closet served 733 children across the entire state. This year, the Closet is on track to serve 1,000

children.

Aside from running the Foster Care closet, Leigh and Patrick are passionate advocates for strengthening foster care policy. Their civic engagement on behalf of foster families is admirable, as is their humility. When Leigh and Patrick came to my Washington, D.C. office for the Angels in Adoption program, my staff commended them for the wonderful work they do.

Leigh shook her head. “We aren’t doing anything special,” she said. “It’s just what we do.”